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ABSTRACT

Consensus has been identified as a dimension of family solidarity with important implications for the family network. To investigate the factors contributing to consensus between older adults and their sibling of most contact, 275 adults (173 females, 102 males), with a mean age of 74 years, were interviewed using a questionnaire covering work and retirement, income, health, family, activities and roles, and subjective well being. Consensus was obtained by one global measure in which respondents rated agreement on values between self and sibling on a 9-point scale. To determine the relative importance to consensus of the sibling relationship, seven independent variables were assessed: sex linkage, residential propinquity, communication, educational disparity, helping behavior, sibling expectations, and marital status. An analysis of the results showed that filial expectations, educational disparity, and brother/sister link were the only variables of relative importance to older adult/sibling consensus. Consensus was highest when there were fewer expectations of the sibling, similarity of educational backgrounds, and when the respondent was male and his sibling was female. Brother/sister and brother/brother links, residential propinquity, communication by mail or telephone, helping behaviors, and marital status were of no relative importance to consensus. The findings suggest that factors previously found to be associated with intergenerational consensus may vary in their importance. (Author/BL)

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RURAL/URBAN ELDERLY AND SIBLINGS: THEIR VALUE CONSENSUS[1]

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RURAL/URBAN ELDERLY AND THEIR SIBLINGS: THEIR VALUE CONSENSUS. P. K. Suggs, & V. R. Kivett, NC Agri. Res. Serv., School of Home Ec., UNC Greensboro, NC 27412.

Consensus has been identified as a dimension of family solidarity with important implications for the family network. This investigation studied the factors contributing to the consensus between older adults (age 65 and older) and their sibling of most contact. Respondents (N = 275) lived in a rural/urban area. Seven independent variables were entered into a multiple regression model to determine their relative importance to consensus of the sibling relationship. Results showed that 7% of the variance in consensus could be explained. Filial expectations, educational disparity, and the brother/sister link were the only variables of relative importance to older adult/sibling consensus. There was greater consensus when there were fewer expectations of the sibling, similarity of educational backgrounds, and when the respondent was male and his sibling was female. Brother/sister and brother/brother links, residential propinquity, communication by mail or telephone, helping behaviors, and marital status were of no relative importance to consensus. The results suggest that factors previously found to be associated with intergenerational consensus may vary in their importance to intragenerational consensus.

Family solidarity is an important construct in the area of intergenerational research (1). Solidarity refers to the social bond or cohesiveness of a group, in this instance, the family. Three components appear to constitute solidarity: affection, which is the nature and extent of positive sentiment toward members of the other generations in the family; association, which refers to the interactional patterns between family members; and consensus, which is the level of value agreement between kin (1). Consensus solidarity has received considerably less attention than that of affection and association. Bengtson, Olander, and Haddad (1) pointed out the similarity of variables associated with the three dimensions of solidarity. They found that the variables influencing association and affection, for example, sex linkage, residential propinquity, filial responsibility, communication, and helping behaviors, also influence or have an association with consensus. According to various researchers, families tend to move toward congruence and even complete agreement in their value orientation (2). Despite the potential for value dissonance (older persons minimizing disagreement and younger members maximizing it) most families appear to have developed a 'text of values' under which members can meet, enjoy one another's company, and share a sense of responsibility for one another (4).

Little research has been done in the area of consensus among the elderly and their families, particularly among older siblings. Siblings can be a source of strength and emotional support for the elderly. Behavioral scientists have attributed significance to sibling relationships, however, there has been little empirical research on sibling interaction (5).

Limited research in the area of sibling relationships shows siblings to be a significant source of support for the elderly (7).

Approximately 80% of older persons have living brothers and/or sisters. Upon reaching old age, many of the elderly seek to renew old sibling relationships. This is particularly true for those elderly who are life-long singles and those married with no children (6, 8). With changing family patterns (fewer children in families), and the subsequent increase of siblings, the strength of the sibling relationship could be expected to become greater (7).

Allan (9) examined the qualitative nature of sibling relationships in later life. In a study of 41 older adult siblings, he found even when contact was limited, involvement continued. Most of the sibling relationships appeared to have limited but enduring involvement, with siblings keeing in touch and being informed of each other's overall situation. Allan found, as have others, that there was a stronger affectional tie between sisters than between brothers or cross-sex pairs (9, 10, 2). In a study of 220 adults (age range 50 to 80), Cumming and Schne.der (11) found the sibling relationship second in strength only to the parent-child relationship (11). When asked to whom they felt the closest, 74% of the elderly named a sibling. This research showed that generational solidarity tends to be a very important relational tie of the last 20 or 30 years of life.

Two view points are held regarding the stability of sibling relationships in later life. Some investigators have asserted that sibling relationships decline with age and have based this argument on geographic proximity and frequency of contact between them (12). Rosenberg and

Anspach (13) have also argued the case for decline asserting that for siblings to maintain a viable relationship, they should live near each other. On the other hand, there is considerable support for increases in the sibling relationship in later life (9, 6, 7, 11, 14, 15). Manney claimed that the sibling relationship may drift during young adulthood and the child rearing years, but most tend to renew the relationship as their children mature and leave home. Cicirelli (7) found that amount of visiting, telephoning, feelings of closeness and similarity in values among siblings were strongly correlated. Certain behaviors among siblings became relevant in adulthood and old age, for example, helping, serving as confidant, giving advice, aiding in decision making, boosting morale, and nursing care. Cicirelli (16) also found that siblings fulfill several important functions: parent substitute, teacher, role model, challenger, and stimulator.

Other research has questioned the functionality of the sibling relationship in later life. Lopata (17), in her study of Chicago widows, found that siblings were neither part of the past nor current emotional support system of widows. She felt two factors contributed to this observation: expansion of couple companionate relationships: and geographical separation. The most surprising finding in her study was that siblings did not contribute substantially to the development nor maintenance of self-feeling of respect, usefulness, acceptance, security, independence or self-sufficiency of widows. Overall, however, studies tend to find that siblings do offer some type of support and strength to one another and that although help from a sibling is rarely used, the very existence of a sibling as a possible source of support is important.

In summary, the literature shows that siblings do have an important place in the lives of the elderly. They play many roles, for example, confidant, decision maker, and booster of morale. Contact is maintained, often in spite of the geographical distance between siblings, with sisters maintaining a stronger affectional tie than brothers or brothers and sisters. Although the research is very limited, as among intergenerational kin, it is reasonable to assume that the solidarity of the sibling relationship is not only influenced by affection (helping behaviors) and association (feelings of closeness) but also by consensus or the level of agreement held about life by the older adult and the sibling.

The purposes of the present study were to determine the extent of consensus between older siblings as perceived by older adults and the factors contributing to consensus. The factors included were extent of communication by mail or telephone, marital status of the older adult, the sex linkage of the relationship, amount of help received by the older adult, educational disparity between siblings, residential propinquity, and expectations for help that the older adult holds of the sibling.

PROCEDURES

Sample

This study was a secondary analysis of data from 321 adults aged 65 and older living in a rural-transitional area situated in the Piedmont plain of North Carolina. The sampling procedure used was the compact cluster technique. For purposes of this study only respondents with siblings were included, $N = 275$ (173 females; 102 males), or 86% of the original sample. Approximately 76% of the sample reported average to

excellent health. The mean educational level of the sample was 10 years. Approximately 60% of the sample was married with 40% being single, separated or divorced, or widowed. The mean age of the sample was 74 years. The mean age of the siblings of most contact was 69 years. Approximately 4% of the older adults in the sample reported having a sibling in a nursing home.

Measurement

Trained interviewers administered a 141 item questionnaire to all persons 65 and older living in the selected areas and agreeing to participate. The interviews took approximately one and one-half hours. The participation rate was 82%. The questionnaire covered seven major areas: general information, work and retirement, income, health, family, activities and roles, and subjective well-being. Only those data relevant to the present analysis are reported. The respondents answered questions with regard to the sibling with whom they had the most contact.

The measure of consensus, the dependent variable, was obtained by one global measure which determined from the respondent the extent of value similarity between him/her and the sibling. Black and Bengtson (13) have suggested a global measure to be the best determinant of value consensus. The respondent was shown the picture of a ladder with rungs numbered 0 to 9. Subjects were asked to suppose that the top of the ladder represented total agreement of views about life and the bottom represented total disagreement. They were then asked - "Where on the ladder do you feel that (sibling) and you stand at the present time?" The scores of the variable were normalized by a log transformation and adjusted for negative skewness.

The independent measures included sex linkage, residential propinquity, communication by mail or telephone, educational disparity, helping behaviors, sibling expectations, and marital status. Sex linkage was a dummy variable - sister/brother, brother/sister, brother/brother, with sister/sister treated as the referent. Residential propinquity was measured by asking the respondent, "How long does it take (brother/sister of most contact) to get from his/her residence to yours?" Categorical responses were: same household, 10 minutes or less; 11-30 minutes; 31-60 minutes; over 60 minutes; one day or more (coded 1-6 respectively). Communication by mail or telephone was a composite score of the frequency with which the sibling phoned or wrote to the older adult. The possible responses were: never, less than once per year, about once a year, several times a year, about once a month, several times a month, once per week, several times per week, daily (coded 1-9, respectively). Educational disparity or the differential educational levels between the respondents and siblings was determined by subtracting the sibling's educational level from that of the respondent. Helping behavior was a composite of ten ways in which the siblings helped the older adult (for example, financial, illness, household chores). Respondents were asked how often their siblings helped in these situations. Categorical responses were: never, less than once per year, once per year, several times per year, once per month, several times per month, once per week, several times per week, daily (coded 1-9, respectively). Sibling expectations was determined by giving the respondents hypothetical situations of older adults in various situations, for example, illness, financial crisis, isolation, and asking the respondents to rate the extent to which they felt siblings were responsible in these situations. Possible responses were: responsible no matter what, responsible for helping

if they can, and not responsible (coded 3-1, respectively). Marital status was grouped into two categories, married and unmarried (single, widowed, separated or divorced) (coded 1, 0 respectively).

Analysis

A multiple regression analysis with hierarchical inclusion of seven independent variables was used to measure the extent of consensus between older adults and their siblings. The order of entry of the independent variables, as determined from the literature, was sex linkage, residential propinquity, communication by mail or telephone, educational disparity, helping behavior, sibling expectations, and marital status. Pearson product-moment correlations were computed to determine the relationship between consensus and the continuous variables. Frequencies and percentages were obtained for general descriptive data.

RESULTS

As observed in Table 1, 86% of the older adults had brothers or sisters. The majority of the sample was female (63%). The mean age for the older adults was 74 years and siblings of most contact had a mean age of 69 years. Approximately 4% of older adults had a sibling in a nursing home. The sex link combinations were: sister/brother-27%; brother/sister-17%; brother/brother-20%; sister/sister-36%. Approximately 78% of the respondents reported that they were in "almost total" value agreement with siblings.

[Place Table 1 about here]

Zero-order correlations (Table 2) revealed important relationships between consensus and three of the variables. These included educational disparity, expectations of siblings, and helping behaviors by sibling. Consensus was higher if there was a minimum of educational disparity, if sibling expectations were low, and where helping behavior was low.

[Place Table 2 about here]

According to the multiple regression analysis (Table 3), the independent variables contributed 7% of the variance in consensus, or level of agreement, between the older adults and their siblings, $F = 2.83$ (9, 10), $p < .01$. The most important contributors in order of their importance were the brother/sister vs. sister/sister link, expectations of siblings, and educational disparity. The linkage, brother/sister, was positively related to consensus. That is to say, that when the respondent was male and the sibling was female, the level of consensus was higher than for the other linkages. Expectations for sibling assistance had an inverse relationship with consensus. In other words, the lower the expectations older adults had of siblings, the higher the consensus between them. Educational disparity also had a negative relationship with consensus. The greater the disparity between older adults and their siblings, the lower the level of consensus. The other variables: sister/brother, sister/sister, brother/brother, residential propinquity, communication by mail or telephone, helping behaviors by the sibling, and marital status were of no relative importance to the amount of consensus between the older adults and their siblings.

[Place Table 3 about here]

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the factors that contribute to consensus between older rural-transitional adults and their siblings, and the relative importance of a number of variables to sibling agreement. The results of this study indicated that only a small amount of variance could be explained (7%) in consensus. The factors which contributed significantly to consensus between older adults and siblings were: expectations of assistance from siblings, sex-linkage, and educational disparity. Variables of no relative importance to consensus were: residential propinquity, extent of communication by mail or telephone, marital status, help received from siblings, sister/sister link, brother/brother link, and the sister/brother link.

Approximately 78% of the respondents rated their consensus with their siblings as almost total agreement. This finding supports Bengtson and Kuypers' (19) concept of 'developmental stake'. They theorized that middle generations focus on maintenance of continuity while younger generations focus on individualization and change. In other words, the elderly may have a need to minimize the value disagreement within their families. It is also possible that because siblings are within the same generation, they would have a tendency to reach a similar level of value agreement, having been exposed to some of the same early socialization experiences.

The findings concerning educational disparity and expectations of sibling support the literature (20); however, the sex linkage findings are less supportive. The greater the disparity between the siblings in terms of education and the greater the perceived expectations of the sibling toward the respondent, the lower the value consensus. When the sex linkage was

brother/sister, as opposed to sister/sister, brother/brother, or sister/brother, the higher the value consensus. The finding regarding educational disparity is supported by observations by Bengtson, Olander, and Haddad (1) who posited that educational differences weaken lineage solidarity. Bengtson, et al., purported that the greater the dissonance in experiences shared, such as education, the weaker the solidarity between kin. This observation appears to be based upon the fact that the further apart siblings are in terms of education and associated socioeconomic circumstances the less likely they are to agree on life issues.

Data from this study suggest that the greater the expectations siblings have of one another, the lower their value consensus. In the study on kinship in an urban setting, Adams (21) discovered that when the necessity of helping becomes the central activity for the siblings, the relationship is weakened. His observation suggested that expectations of helping, particularly economic, tend to put the sibling relationship under stress. In the present study, this observation does not appear to be a result of socioeconomic differences since educational disparity was controlled. Other explanations may be available. Data from Seelbach and Sauer (18), for example, showed a relationship between filial expectations and morale. They found filial expectations to be inversely correlated with morale. These data suggest that high expectations for assistance from kin may: either have a negative impact on measures of affect; or, may be negatively affected by measures of positive affect. Although the antecedal importance is not entirely evident, there appears to be an inverse relationship between expectations for assistance from kin and measures of positive affect.

The finding that sex linkage was a significant contributer to consensus among siblings supported the literature. However, the cross-sex sibling

observation was contrary to that purported by the literature. The brother/sister link as opposed to the sister/sister link was the more significant contributor to the consensus among the older adults and their siblings. Whether through acculturation or predisposition, females appear to be more introspective of relationships than males. This is suggested through findings of greater affilial behaviors of females with regard to self-disclosure and confidant relationships (22, 23). With these characteristics it may be that females tend to be more evaluative in their relationships than males. When rating consensus with their brothers and/or sisters females would tend to be more sensitive to any disparities or discrepancies in their relationships than brothers.

In general, the findings of no differences with respect to the variables communication by mail or telephone, residential propinquity, helping behaviors, and female link did not support the literature regarding dimensions of solidarity as they related to lineage research. The fact that data from the present study do not support the findings of other investigators with respect to the importance of these variables may be due to the fact that this was not a lineage study, and may be a result of studying consensus as a single dimension as opposed to studying it as a part of total family solidarity. Communication by mail or telephone, marital status, and helping behaviors have been found to be important in the area of global family solidarity. Perhaps when investigating consensus as a single dimension, the importance of these variables changes. Consensus is the level of agreement about life felt among kin. One may speculate that the variables educational disparity, expectations of siblings, and a particular sex linkage deal more directly with values and views about life; whereas, the other variables may help

maintain contact and feelings of closeness, but not necessarily enhance value agreement among kin.

Additional reasons for the limited number of correlates of consensus could be inherent in the data. The fact that there were more variables involved in significant bivariate correlations with consensus than were significant multivariate predictors may be a result of multicollinearity among the independent variables themselves. The small amount of variance found in consensus is partially a result of limited variability in the dependent variable. The scores were highly skewed in the direction of high consensus. This could be due to social desirability surrounding responses to the consensus question, or "halo" effects of the variable.

Results from this study suggest that in only a few instances can factors previously identified with bonding between lineage kin be observed as primary to sibling or intragenerational solidarity as viewed through consensus. This finding may be based upon differences in consensus 'phenomenon' within generations as well as weak reliability in measurement and social desirability in responses.

Although only a small amount of variance was explained in consensus in the present study, the results provide several insights into sibling relationships in later life. Similar to findings reported for intergenerational samples, the data suggest the importance of similarity of educational background to family bonds within generations. The findings offer interesting speculations regarding the negative impact that expectations for sibling assistance may have on sibling ties and flag the brother/sister dyad as an area of future investigation in studies of intergenerational helping and relationships.

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Table 1. Older Adults and Siblings According to Selected Characteristics

Variable	% (N = 275)
Siblings	
Older adults with siblings	86.0
Older adults without siblings	14.0
Marital Status	
Married	60.0
Unmarried (single, separated, divorced, widowed)	40.0
Sex	
Male	37.0
Female	63.0
Number of older adults with siblings in Nursing Home	4.0
Health (Older Adult)	
Above average	76.0
Below average	24.0
Sex linkage	
Sister/brother	27.0
Brother/sister	17.0
Brother/brother	20.0
Sister/sister	36.0
	Mean Years
Age	
Older adults	74.0
Sibling	69.0
Education	
Older adults	10.0

Table 2. Zero-order Correlates among Variables Characterizing Consensus between Older Adults and Siblings

Variables	Consensus
Residential propinquity	.00
Communication by mail/telephone	-.07
Educational disparity	-.15**
Helping behaviors by sibling	-.12*
Expectations of siblings	-.16**

*p < .05
**p < .01

Table 3. Contributors to Consensus between Older Adults and Their Siblings

Variable	B[a]	R^2	R^2 Change
Sister/brother	.01	.00	.00
Brother/sister	.20**	.06	.05
Brother/brother	-.06	.06	.00
Residential propinquity	.06	.06	.00
Communication by mail/telephone	-.06	.06	.10
Educational disparity	-.10*	.07	.01
Helping behaviors by sibling	-.05	.07	.01
Filial expectations	-.18**	.10	.03
Married vs. not married	.00	.11	.04

R^2 = .07 df = 9,210 F = 2.83**

(N = 275)

[a]Beta refers to Standardized Betas

*p <.05

**p <.01